

The Circuit Writer



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BICENTENNIAL NOTES

THE REV. THOMAS MORRELL: NEW JERSEY
METHODIST PATRIOT AND PREACHER, 1747-1838

by

The Rev. Robert Drew Simpson, Ph.D.

The Rev. Thomas Morrell was a unique combination. His leadership and courage found a ready market as an "officer-hero" in the American Revolution. His friendship with George Washington reflects the character of the man. But as the war ended Morrell's conversion to Methodism brought those same qualities of leadership and courage to focus in a distinguished career in the church.. Ranging from New Jersey and New York to Charleston, South Carolina, Thomas Morrell, often plagued by illness, made a lasting contribution to Methodism as a preacher and polemicist.

Morrell's story began when his family sought a better business prospect and moved from New York City to Elizabethtown, New Jersey. In 1771, Thomas Morrell became his father's partner in a store on Water Street. His mother, although a Presbyterian, was a Methodist at heart. She had been a follower of Philip Embury, and one of the earliest members of the Methodist Society in New York City.

When the news of the Battle of Lexington reached Elizabethtown, it prompted a call for a company of militia. Thomas Morrell, at the age of 28, already a popular businessman, was a natural choice for captain. A call to action followed almost immediately. The Committee of Vigilance, learning of the approach of a British transport carrying military supplies, ordered four armed boats to attempt its capture. Captain Thomas Morrell commanded one of those boats. He made contact with the British transport about forty miles off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. With the men hidden below decks, the American boat appeared to be a pilot or fishing boat. As Morrell approached the British transport, his men poured on deck and took the "Green Mountain Valley" without the loss of a man. The transport was a rich prize, for it was carrying 12 guns, 40 men, and 400 tons of provisions to the British army in New York City. Captain Morrell and his men brought the prize home by way of Perth Amboy. This event may be one of the few instances of "naval" militia action in the Revolutionary War. Their daring was hailed among the Americans, and evidence of Morrell's competence and courage only encouraged his neighbors to look to him for further leadership. When in the summer of 1776, Washington was before Boston with ammunition in short supply, gun powder was brought from Pennsylvania and Maryland to Elizabethtown. Captain Morrell and two others, taking four wagons of ammunition, made their way through enemy country, delivering the shipment to the beleaguered American troops.

One incident in Morrell's life at this time gives a picture of the preacher to come. About the middle of June 1776, he received a regular Captain's commission from

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the Provincial Congress sitting in Trenton. He was given a warrant as well to raise a company of 78 effective men for five months service. His order was to equip and train them, and then join General Washington in New York with the least possible delay. His technique for recruitment was unique. He persuaded the commandant of two militia companies to muster his men in front of the Elizabethtown Presbyterian Church. The 29 year old Captain Morrell proceeded to make a persuasive patriotic address. At the conclusion, he gave his "altar call", inviting all who would come to the aid of their "bleeding country" to join him under his standard. In five minutes his company was more than filled.

By the 10th of July, Morrell's company had been ordered to Long Island under the command of General John Sullivan. They were attached to the New Jersey Brigade. On August 27, 1776, Thomas Morrell and his company were in advance of the main American force on the heights of Flatbush and received the first British attack. The company was nearly cut to pieces. Morrell, himself, was severely wounded, shot through the chest and left for dead. Finally, he was carried by litter further behind the lines. Washington personally detailed six soldiers to carry him to his father's house in Elizabethtown. Because of the threatening approach of Lord Cornwallis and his army, he was moved again, this time to the home of the Rev. Jonathan Elmer, pastor of the Turkey (New Providence, N. J.) Presbyterian Church where he remained until he recuperated. This was just over the hill from his Uncle Jacob Morrell in Chatham, where Washington quartered briefly while encamped in Morristown. After Morrell's recovery he was commissioned a Major of the 4th New Jersey Regiment in the Continental Army. He saw heavy action in the campaign of 1777 at Brandywine and Germantown. But Morrell's health was failing. Finally after a personal conference with General Washington, he was discharged from service. Morrell returned to Elizabethtown a hero and resumed his role as a local merchant.

But the soldier of liberty in a few years became a soldier of the Lord. We can imagine that his Methodist mother's influence bore fruit. In the autumn of 1785, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was not yet a year old, Bishop Francis Asbury appointed the Rev. John Haggerty to visit Elizabethtown and establish the Newark Methodist Circuit. Haggerty made his headquarters at the Morrell home and began preaching to their neighbors and friends. Thomas Morrell, then 38 years old, was an eager hearer. He states that in October of that year: "I was awakened by the preacher, The Rev. John Haggerty; and in March of 1786 I received witness of God's Spirit of my acceptance. In June 1786 I began to preach in Elizabethtown and in several parts of that circuit." M. S. Journal.

Atkinson's Memorial of Methodist in New Jersey (pp. 319-20) describes one of Morrell's first preaching attempts, an attempt which nearly ended his career. It was during a visit to the home of his uncle, Jacob Morrell,* in Chatham, N. J., that same year. Thomas may have been the first Methodist preacher in that place.

*The home of Jacob Morrell in Chatham, N. J., was probably Gen. Washington's headquarters (63 Main St.) for two or three days in August, 1781. (Cunningham, J., Chatham at The Crossing of the Fishawack, p. 37.) Thomas Morrell had already been personally acquainted with Washington before his uncle's friendship. It may be that Thomas was the mutual contact.

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Atkinson writes of that occasion: "Having been an officer in the Army of the Revolution, and for several years subsequently a merchant in Elizabethtown, he was widely known and a very large assembly came to hear the "Major" preach, especially since he joined the sect everywhere spoken against." Apparently Morrell felt his efforts a total failure, for he decided that night to give up the whole idea of being a preacher. But the next morning while at breakfast with his uncle, one after another, people began arriving who had been "awakened" by his sermon. Having been raised under Presbyterian influence, the Methodist preacher was launched. It was a career which was to lead him on unexpected and distant paths. His unpublished Journal outlines his beginning: "(In) March 1787 (I) began to ride as a traveling preacher and rode in Elizabethtown Circuit for 20 months with Robert Cloud. (At) the Conference in New York in 1788 was ordained a deacon, appointed to the Trenton Circuit with John Merrick and Jethro Johnson. At the June Conference in New York in 1789 I was ordained an elder and was appointed for that city with Brother Cloud who was with me for 12 months and Brother Merrick four months."

Morrell was now over 40 years old and had had little preparation for his work. But his native intelligence and qualities of leadership earned him respect.

At the same Conference session at which Morrell was ordained an elder, Bishop Francis Asbury offered the proposal that an appropriate congratulatory message be presented to General George Washington, who had only four weeks before been inaugurated President of the United States. When the address was prepared and approved, Thomas Morrell was asked to make contact with Washington. In a letter to Ezekiel Cooper, August 26, 1827, he recalls the circumstances: "...concerning the address to General Washington, I can furnish you with every material circumstance respecting it, having acted as a sub-agent in the transaction... Mr. Dickens and myself waited on the general; and as I had had some personal acquaintance with him, I was desired to present him with a copy, and request his reception of the original by the hands of the bishops(Coke and Asbury). The president appointed the fourth succeeding day, at twelve o'clock, to receive the bishops. They went at the appointed hour, accompanied by Brother Dickens and Thomas Morrell. Mr. Asbury, with great self-possession, read the address in an impressive manner. The president read his reply with fluency and animation. They interchanged their respective addresses; and, after sitting a few minutes, we departed..."

Morrell's letter notes that the address was printed in a local paper and soon other denominations followed the Methodists' example. Actually, whether Morrell knew it or not, the Methodists were not the first religious group to congratulate the newly inaugurated President. Two weeks earlier the German Lutherans of the Philadelphia area formally expressed their support. But the Methodist move was important -- it was the first church-wide support pledged to the new President and the Constitution. It was especially significant that Methodists took this action for this new church was one fashioned out of the trial and persecutions of the Revolutionary War.

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A manuscript Journal is the only record of Thomas Morrell's ministry during the period from June, 1789, through 1809. The materials in this Journal range from a meticulous record of texts and sermons preached to more descriptive notes covering an interesting journey with Bishop Asbury. In 1791-92 Morrell and Asbury traveled through Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina to Charleston, South Carolina, where Morrell remained as preacher-in-charge until June 17, 1792. His journal for this period reflects in an intriguing way the merchant in him as much as the preacher, for as he travelled Morrell described in interesting fashion the business and trade conditions in such places as Annapolis, Alexandria, and Fredricksburg. In Charleston on April 9, for instance, he noted that: "Green pease are now selling in the market 5/a peck -- the first crop of pease over but cucumbers in great plenty."

While in Charleston, South Carolina, Morrell was thrust into serious controversy. William Hammett, a charismatic Methodist preacher in Charleston, made serious charges against Asbury, challenging his right to appoint preachers. Bishop Thomas Coke and Thomas Morrell were appointed to answer Hammett's charges in behalf of Methodism. Morrell's defense came in an article titled "Vindication of Truth Discovered." It was an extended controversy, flaring finally in open division which led to the formation of the Primitive Methodist Church under Hammett's leadership.

Morrell returned to New York City in November, 1792, and his stationed ministry continued there or in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, depending upon his health, for the years following. An interesting local note in Morrell's Journal for April, 1793, tells of the subscription being taken for the new Methodist Episcopal church in Elizabethtown, New Jersey. He described it as "a handsome building generally filled with hearers...it is reckoned the neatest Methodist Church on the continent of its size."

On November 30, 1794, Morrell became desperately ill in New York City. At the hands of Dr. Physick he underwent "3 bleedings, 15 purges, and 30 days of abstinence." Finally he went home to Elizabethtown on January 17, 1796, "to recuperate or die". Obviously he recuperated, more probably because he was beyond the reach of Dr. Physick and his remedies than for any other reason. Thereafter, Morrell preached mainly in New York City and Elizabeth until May, 1801. On February 22, 1800, while serving a brief stint in Baltimore, he wrote: "I preached the funeral of General Washington to a vastly crowded audience." The sermon was later printed. This was probably one of numerous memorial services offered at the time of the first President's death.

During July, 1803, while preacher-in-charge in New York City, his Journal describes the ravages of the "Yellow fever" epidemic. "After services on July 14th," he wrote, "we shut up John St. Church." By October, 50,000 people had fled the city including the Morrell family. Using the home in Elizabethtown as his base, Morrell ranged over the circuit preaching wherever opportunity occurred. Belleville, Newark, Bridgton, Turkey, and Chatham are mentioned in the Journal. Actually poor health forced his retirement from this time forward, but he continued preaching until 1835 when his health finally broke. He died three years later at the age of 91. The New Jersey Annual Conference Journal for 1839 in a tribute to Morrell

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described his last days and expressed an appreciation for his ministry. The entry states: "In his last illness, which was protracted, he suffered much from soreness of throat and an asthmatic affection, but he suffered patiently, he suffered as a Christian, his last moments were those of heavenly peace and heavenly triumph, he died in the Lord.

"He possessed a strong and vigorous mind, which remained almost unimpaired by the infirmities of age, until the last. As a preacher he was talented and acceptable. His preaching was characterized by a boldness and energy peculiarly striking. 'He spake as one having authority,' and God owned his word to the edification of the church, and conversion of many souls, but

His work is done, his labors o'er,
He suffers, toils, and weeps no more,
But shares an endless rest."

The vigor of Thomas Morrell's mind and the energy of his person, which marked him as patriot and as preacher, produced a significant contribution in his time to our nation and the Methodist Church. It is difficult to imagine that such a person could ever be at "endless rest." It is more believable that such a life force as Morrell was may be going on in some undiscovered dimension of God's Universe.

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

ATTENTION PASTORS, PLEASE !!!!

The Commission on Archives and History is collecting as a part of our Conference Archives at Drew a one hour cassett tape from each and every member of the conference, active or retired.

One side of the tape should contain a sermon. The other side of the tape should contain material of a biographical or historical nature, e.g. observations about your background, education, and churches you have served.

The Commission will supply the cassette or you may provide your own. We can lend you a tape recorder if you do not have one available.

Our original plan was to request each member of the conference to make the tape at the time of their retirement and that all retired members would make their tape immediately. A few members have made their tapes and deposited them in the Archives already before retirement.

We want your sermon and your record in your voice in the conference archives whenever you will do it. What an addition these tapes will be to our Conference archives!

---Paul E. Spiecker, President

LOCAL CHURCH RECORDS PROJECT

In order to encourage the gathering and preservation of local church records the Conference Commission is launching a microfilming project for local churches. Expenses would be shared equally between the local church and the Conference Commission. Microfilming would be done at cost by Drew University Library.

Each local church is encouraged to form a Records and History Committee and to begin to gather together from attics and basements, closets and trunks, all available official records (membership, baptisms, marriages, burials, etc.) along with minutes of the most important boards and committees (Administrative Boards, Trustees, United Methodist Women, United Methodist Men, Youth Fellowships and their predecessor groups).

A master microfilm file would be maintained in the Conference Archives at Drew. Physical copies may be returned to the local church or be placed on deposit with the Conference Archives as desired. Contact President Paul Spiecker for details.

LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY CONTEST - Awards to be presented during 1976 Conference

Six local churches--Broadway, Elizabeth (Park), Hasbrouck Heights, Little Falls, Milford and Washington--have submitted histories of their churches published during the calendar year 1975 for our third annual LOCAL CHURCH HISTORY RECOGNITION CONTEST. Two awards will be presented during the 1976 meeting of the Conference in June of 1976.

If your church has already published or plans to publish a history of your local church in 1976, we urge you to enter it in next year's contest. Large or small, pamphlet or hard-bound, mimeographed or printed, all histories produced during 1976 are eligible. Each history will become part of the Conference's permanent collection. MAIL ONE COPY TO: Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, New Jersey, 07940 by February 1, 1977.

GIFT TO ARCHIVES

Mr. Chester E. Gill of Parsippany presented to the manuscript collection of Drew University letters and an autobiography of a father-son team who were ministerial members of the Newark Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the 19th century--Cornelius Clark, Sr. (1811-1888) and Cornelius Clark, Jr. (1834-1898)

TRAVELING EXHIBIT ON BISHOP FRANCIS ASBURY

A small exhibit of Asbury memorabilia from the collection of Drew University is available on request for use at special celebrations in local churches. The exhibit includes several mounted prints and photographs, a set of ordination certificates signed by our first Bishop, along with a pair of spectacles he wore. When used with historical items from a local congregation, this makes an attractive addition to an anniversary or other historical observation. Contact Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe, Drew University Library, Madison, N. J. 07940, 377-3000, Ext. 243.

HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL DINNER MEETING

"Bibles for the American Revolution"

"Bibles for the American Revolution" will be the theme of the Rev. Dr. Frederick E. Maser's address to the annual dinner meeting of the Conference Historical Society Tuesday evening May 11, 1976. Dr. Maser, retired pastor of Old St. George's Church of Philadelphia, is a popular lecturer on Methodist history.

7:00 P. M. - Chatham United Methodist Church 460 Main Street \$4.75 per person

Contact President Paul Spiecker by phone for late reservations - 427-0725

CELEBRATING THE HERITAGE

- BELVIDERE** In addition to plans for skits to depict the 150-year history of their church and the Bicentennial Year, the Church School plans to clear up a neglected cemetery located where the original church building once stood.
- DOVER** A gala bicentennial service and celebration was held at First Church, Dover Sunday, March 28. A parish dinner, church school projects, and exhibits followed a service of worship. Dr. Rowe of Drew University preached on "Nostalgia and Newness."
- EDISON** Two special bicentennial worship services have been held. Dr. Kenneth E. Rowe of Drew University preached at the January service commemorating the life and ministry of the founder of Scandinavian American missions, The Rev. Olaf Hedstrom and his famous Bethelship in New York Harbor. Mr. Thomas Shoobridge, lay speaker at Wesley Church, preached a sermon on Captain Thomas Webb, at a recent church service complete with eye patch and sword!
- PERTH AMBOY** The historic clock tower was recently repainted by the city of Perth Amboy. The maintenance and the electric bill for this clock are all cared for by the city government!
- PHILLIPSBURG** The Wesley Women's Bible Class of Wesley Church, organized by Mrs. Milton E. Grant in 1925, held its 50th anniversary banquet on November 17, 1975 with Pastor and Mrs. Thomas F. Cruddas as their honored guests. A history of the class has been compiled to become part of the permanent historical records of the church.
- STOCKHOLM** The Stockholm United Methodist Church is planning a week long celebration May 23rd thru May 30th to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the building of the Church, the 176th anniversary of the founding of the Congregation and the 200th Birthday of our Country.

STOCKHOLM
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The Celebration will start at 3 P.M. Sunday afternoon, May 23rd with the unveiling of a plaque stating that the church is on the State Register of Historic Places. Among the speakers of the day will be Rev. Henry L. Lambdin whose first pastorate was in Stockholm in 1912.

May 24th, Monday has been designed Community Night and all organizations of the township will be invited to attend.

May 25th, Tuesday will be Music Night with Mrs. Sim Van Natta presenting a program of Colonial Music.

May 26th, Wednesday the Youth Group will have a Box Social followed by a Block Dance.

May 27th, Thursday is Scout Night. The Brownies, Cub Scouts and Boy and Girl Scouts will present a program. The Stockholm Church has sponsored a Boy Scout Troop since 1923 making it one of the oldest, continuous sponsors in the Morris-Sussex Council.

May 28th, Friday there will be a dinner in Memorial Hall.

May 29th, Memorial Hall will have an exhibit of historic and local interest.

The week of Celebration will conclude with a Sunday afternoon Service at 3 P.M.; the principle speaker will be Dr. Clark W. Hunt, District Superintendent.

Mr. Richard Clayton is writing a history of the Church. The church is located on Route 515 the Stockholm-Vernon Road. The Rev. Newell J. Smith is Pastor.

TENAFLY

The stage of Tenaflly Church resounded to a bicentennial drama "The Battle of Liberty Courthouse," part of a three program planned in cooperation with the First and Galilee Churches of Englewood.

WEST PORTAL

Former members and friends returned to the West Portal Church in Asbury on October 19 to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the founding of the church. A worship service was held in the afternoon with the Rev. Henry McKinnon, superintendent of the Southern District as preacher. The Rev. Edna M. von Dreele, pastor of the Church, led the worship. A Fellowship Supper followed. Mr. Andrew Beatty, Lay Leader and Church Historian, prepared an anniversary history and arranged a display of memorabilia.

WYCKOFF

Jefferson and Adams lived again through a dialogue edited from their correspondence and presented as a vesper service at Grace Church, Wyckoff. The service was one of a year-long series of Bicentennial programs planned by the Council on Ministries. The roles of the second and third Presidents were played by the Rev. Robert J. Duncan, pastor of Grace Church, and the Rev. George Watt, Jr., pastor of the Ridgewood Church.

OTHERS?

THIS IS A REGULAR COLUMN in our newsletter. If your church is planning a bicentennial or other anniversary celebration or preparing a history, please contact the editor and give us your story!